

# Good or Great

Colonel, It Is Up to You!

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with  
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Over the past 10 years, I have directly supervised more than 90 colonels in a diverse array of staff, command, and combat environments. It has become obvious to me that the vast majority of them fall into two distinct categories: good colonels and great colonels. The year that I recently spent as commander of the 321st Air Expeditionary Wing in Iraq served to reaffirm that certain tangible attributes do indeed separate the great colonels from the merely good ones. In my new duties as commandant of the Air War College, my goal is to help officers understand these attributes and, more importantly, inspire them to become truly great colonels.

The difference between a good or great colonel can be as discreet as the simple courtesy of a kind word of thanks or as obvious as a display of personal and professional courage and leadership necessary to ensure a tough mission's success. What is a great colonel, and how does an officer be-

come one? This article begins to answer those questions, considers some of the attributes of great colonels, and provides a framework for colonels to think about colonelship—the art of being a great colonel. No “great colonel” school exists in the professional military education system. Colonels become great by understanding what it means to be a colonel, mentoring, observing other great colonels, reflecting on personal experience, working hard, and practicing colonelship.

Regardless of their duty position, level of command, or seniority, all colonels are expected to make things happen, arrive at decisions, and solve problems. The difference between a good colonel and a great one lies in how he or she carries out those tasks. The “how” entails building relationships with senior leaders and fulfilling the mission. This difference involves more than nuance and is difficult to describe, yet anyone who sees great colonels in action recognizes them as such. Typically, we react to

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their effectiveness and efficiency by saying or thinking, “Obviously that colonel gets it!” Great colonels have the same effect as great teams whose whole far exceeds the sum of their parts and whose accomplishments can vastly surpass expectations. Their presence makes their organizations and people more effective and efficient. They engender a synergy and harmony that transcend the leadership structure depicted by organizational charts or layers of bureaucracy.

Great colonels need not have seniority; rather, greatness is a matter of their perspective, judgment, and a personal awareness that they are empowered for a reason—to make a difference. Regardless of whether they command or lead a staff group, great colonels fill gaps, translate, develop and endorse people, build bridges, and close deals. We would do well to take a close look at how they execute those tasks. Unfortunately, few senior leaders take time to explain to new colonels the requirements for making the move from good to great.

### Great Colonels Fill Gaps

Great colonels are often the first to see gaps—that is, a lack of capability in people, processes, or resources. A great colonel works behind the scenes to reinforce, train, or educate until the gap disappears. Filling gaps works in all directions—up, down, and laterally—in other words, with superiors, subordinates, and peers.

Colonels have the latitude to define many of their own duties; therefore, they must survey the environment and discern where their efforts, experience, and talents are needed. In simple terms, most great colonels effectively explore the boundaries of their authority. The specific duty position of a colonel serves only as the starting point. Unlike a lieutenant colonel, a colonel does not operate within rigid boundaries; he or she has room to place effort selectively or engage inside and outside the parent organization.

The discretion afforded colonels to decide when and where to place effort depends upon their credibility, responsiveness, and relationship with their immediate bosses, other superiors, and peers. Once they sense and acknowledge a colonel's professional authority, most senior leaders welcome and encourage great colonels to push their limits. Building a reputation for taking on tough tasks and “closing deals” in a manner that does not infringe on others is a vital element in the development of a great colonel. Colonels must be selective in their efforts; they understand when to interject themselves into areas and when to let others work the problem or task. This understanding or sense of when to act comes from being in tune with their environment, knowing what is happening around them, and then taking action, when required, based on critical thinking, experience, and judgment.

Filling gaps is more art than science, so great colonels need a thorough understanding of people and processes. Professional relationships and credible, responsive decisions and actions represent the foundation upon which great colonels use collegial, interpersonal skills to garner the trust and confidence necessary to fill gaps. Great colonels must develop a sense of when and where to get involved; great colonels never say, “Not my job!”

### Great Colonels Translate

Of all the skills that colonels possess, the ability to translate—to apply the right perspective—may be the most important. A good colonel becomes a great one by understanding what the boss wants and by comprehending what his words, actions, and emotions really mean. Great colonels add clarity and meaning to random thoughts and senior leaders' “out-loud thinking.” They know when to act and when to let ideas develop. Sometimes colonels must ask for clarification, but after they understand the boss's intent, it is up to them to

translate thoughts into action by providing direction, talking to others, establishing priorities, or reinforcing the commander's intentions through word and deed.

Several translation techniques also guarantee that superiors remain grounded in reality: holding formal and informal conversations and discussion, arranging the boss's schedule to facilitate an accurate picture of the situation, and sometimes closing the door and telling the boss the other side of the story. The latter is not always easy to do, but it is necessary and expected of colonels. Similarly, great colonels encourage subordinates to "close the door" and tell *them* the other side of the story. Great colonels can handle this candor, which encourages their organizations to prosper and grow.

The organization and mission suffer if colonels fail to translate the vision and intent of superiors into action. Failure results in frustration, inaction, wasted efforts, and even low morale. Great colonels have a sense of when to translate and when to seek more information. They are masters at perceiving, both horizontally and vertically, the second- and third-order effects, risks, and considerations necessary to fully understand a course of action or decision. They facilitate decision making with superiors and have the courage to arrive at tough decisions themselves. A great colonel translates and connects to superiors, subordinates, and peers—typically by working behind the scenes and without fanfare. At the end of the day, great colonels obtain buy-in and understanding.

## Great Colonels Develop and Endorse People

Great colonels are mentors who use formal and informal means to develop people. They realize that mentoring is the only way to leave behind a true legacy. Mentoring is more than a duty—training the next generation is an obligation. All true development includes organizing a sound mentoring program, investing in people on- and off-duty,

underwriting mistakes, and absorbing the cost in time and money to send people to professional development schools. Great colonels think in terms of the immediate and long-term benefits of investing in people; they visualize future rewards for today's efforts.

Colonels assess the strengths and weaknesses in people and organizations and then do something to address them. They work both formally and informally to develop people, including subordinates, superiors, and peers. Doing so requires a careful consideration of workload so that no one person or organization becomes overtaxed. Great colonels inspire others to pursue excellence, fostering a climate of team building with the goal of increasing the overall effectiveness of the organization's output.

Great colonels not only develop subordinates but also endorse them to superiors. Colonels help make subordinates successful by ensuring that they receive the lion's share of credit for accomplishments while the colonels underwrite mistakes. This balancing act / skill demands finesse and thoughtfulness since the colonel delegates authority but always assumes ultimate responsibility for success or failure. By the time an officer is promoted to colonel, he or she must suppress the desire to receive accolades, deferring to the good of the organization.

Great colonels make organizations great by developing, endorsing, and empowering people. This process takes time and energy, but, if done well, it exponentially improves morale, efficiency, and productivity. In the long term, it creates a legacy that outlasts any single officer—even a great colonel.

## Great Colonels Build Bridges

Great colonels consistently strive to build networks up and down the chain of command as well as inside and outside their organizations in order to bring people together and create a more synergistic effort. They combine new ideas, talents, and resources to make the organization better and



more productive—they perform graduate-level team building. Great colonels bring people together to create a team more capable than its separate parts.

Relationships built upon trust and confidence empower colonels and allow them to get things done. Good colonels work hard to build relationships; great colonels understand that relationships are a two-way street requiring give and take. This perspective is critical to success; a self-serving or unit-centric colonel will find others reluctant to cooperate. In the end, garnering buy-in depends on the ability to leverage relationships for the good of the whole team.

## Great Colonels Close Deals

Much like the great baseball “closer” who shoulders the pressure in the ninth inning to preserve a win for his team, the great colonel steps up and seals the deal for his organization. Great colonels are closers who possess well-developed skills of persuasion, which, unlike pressure, is based on a logical and intellectually honest argument. The great colonel understands that sound argument is devoid of emotion. An argument may be passionate but rarely zealous. Good persuasion yields consensus, the seminal element of collegiality and cooperation. For example, great colonels will completely and

professionally staff a plan or proposed course of action within their organization and coordinate it with relevant higher, adjacent, and lower echelons. They will then gain buy-in through relationships and build consensus before making a final decision. They do much of this informally through relationships built upon their personal reputations and credibility as honest brokers. Conceivably, a colonel might close the deal using brute force; however, over the long haul, building far-reaching, working relationships and maintaining a reputation as a fair professional contribute significantly to making a great colonel.

## Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, there are good colonels and great colonels. The great ones operate with finesse and make things happen—not by what they do but how they do it. Great colonels make organizations great by filling gaps, translating, developing and endorsing people, building bridges, and closing deals inside and outside their organizations. Without great colonels, no organization can succeed in today's environment. Sometimes being good is not good enough. Good or great: colonel, it is up to you! ✪



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